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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [LE](#) [IS](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: GEAGEA REJECTS TALKS WITH ISRAEL, PUSHES
FOR SHEBA'A WITHDRAWAL

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) In a November 20 meeting with the Ambassador and NEA/ELA Office Director Nicole Champagne, Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea said the GOL should impose a weapons ban given the recent clashes between Christian groups in north Lebanon. He said March 14 has had a consistent national platform since 2005, and that its primary obstacle in the upcoming elections was lack of media support. He believed March 14 would have its electoral lists for the 2009 parliamentary elections completed by the end of the year, and said public opinion is moving in favor of the March 14 coalition. He dismissed the idea of independent candidates being able to help March 14 in the elections. Geagea said President Sleiman's cautious approach was a good one under difficult circumstances, and he welcomed the wave of political reconciliations in Lebanon, saying he would be willing to meet with Hizballah. He noted he would present his own version of the national defense strategy at the next National Dialogue session.

2. (C) Geagea rejected visiting British Foreign Secretary David Miliband's proposal of direct Lebanese talks with Israel. He said the incoming U.S. administration should pressure Israel to withdraw from the Sheba'a Farms, and current Israeli behavior would merely lead to "more and deeper wars." He was convinced Hizballah is nervous in the face of both external threats from abroad and electoral threats domestically. Finally, Geagea shared his thoughts on conditions the incoming U.S. administration should put on engagement with Syria. End summary.

CHRISTIAN CLASHES IN THE NORTH

3. (C) The Ambassador and NEA/ELA Director Champagne, accompanied by Poloffs, called on Samir Geagea at his residence in Maarab November 20. The Ambassador asked Geagea about press reports that he had called for a weapons ban in north Lebanon following a series of clashes among Christian groups in recent weeks. Geagea confirmed that he has spoken to President Sleiman about such a ban, and insisted that the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Internal Security Forces (ISF) should take action. He said he was not as worried as he had been about the threat from the Palestinian camps now that twenty to thirty militants had been arrested and Abdel Rahman Awad, a Fatah al-Islam leader, was surrounded in the

Ain el-Hilwe camp. Nonetheless, he said Lebanese Forces has had "problems" (presumably confrontations) with opposition Marada Party leader Suleiman Franjeh's supporters almost everyday.

UNIFIED PLATFORM, UNIFIED LISTS?

¶4. (C) Ambassador asked Geagea where the March 14 coalition stood on developing a unified common platform and unified candidate lists in the lead-up to the spring 2009 parliamentary elections. Geagea replied, "A common platform is not extremely important." Anyway, he said, March 14 has been talking about its vision for Lebanon since Rafik Hariri's assassination in 2005; the Lebanese people "know where March 14 stands." The important thing will be to have a strategy to win, he stressed, and to adapt election lists according to which March 14 party is strongest in each district. The problem, Geagea complained, is that smaller March 14 parties were trying to get a disproportionate number of seats, while taking shares from the three largest parties in the alliance: Saad Hariri's Future Movement, Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party, and Geagea's Lebanese Forces. (Comment: Geagea was clearly alluding to Amine Gemayel's Kataeb Party as one of these smaller March 14 parties. End comment.)

¶5. (C) Geagea said March 14 was nonetheless making slow progress on developing unified lists, and should have them completed by the end of the year. He believed that President Sleiman would eventually declare his own lists, stocked with independent candidates, though certainly the Syrians would

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object. However, noted Geagea, even if independents run and do well in the elections, they will not be much help to March 14. "No one will beat March 8 except March 14. The independents are locals who speak softly. We need to find strong independents who are willing to run on March 14 lists," he stressed.

¶6. (C) Geagea said the university and professional association elections, while not a perfectly reliable representation of electoral trends, were still a valid indicator, and March 14 was doing well in them. He thought March 14 was making gains in public opinion, partly because Aoun was making speeches the Lebanese people could not understand, and making trips to Iran and Syria the Lebanese people do not like. Nevertheless, Geagea said his March 14 allies were causing problems. He alleged that Saad Hariri depended heavily on cash handouts to win influence which the public sees as bribery. Geagea also worried Hariri was too confident about his prospects in Tripoli, which Geagea said was "not locked up."

MEDIA AND THE ELECTIONS

¶7. (C) Geagea noted that despite March 14's internal problems developing electoral lists, he believed its biggest problem was actually the media. He worried that March 14 Christians have no reliable media outlet to transmit their message. "We have a problem with LBC," he said, "because it is only maybe mildly March 14, but mostly neutral." Geagea stressed the need to re-launch MTV, a Christian television station closed by a court ruling in 2002 for allegedly violating the electoral law by campaigning for Christian candidates. He said the staff was ready to begin work, but they needed \$25 million funding to get started. (Comment: Geagea's criticism of LBC is not surprising, given his ongoing legal dispute over ownership of the network. End comment.)

RECONCILIATION GOOD, PRESIDENT DOING WELL, GEAGEA TO PRESENT NATIONAL DEFENSE STRATEGY

18. (C) Geagea believed the recent wave of political reconciliations in Lebanon was a positive step toward calming tensions and preventing violence before the elections. He said that he would be willing to meet with Hizballah for a reconciliation, as his March 14 partners Saad Hariri and Walid Jumblatt had done, but he did not expect an invitation, since, Geagea believed, such a meeting would serve his interests more than Hizballah's. Geagea said President Sleiman was doing a good job under exceptional circumstances, cautiously managing to stay above the fray and deflect political tension. He expected nothing of substance from Sleiman's November 24-25 visit to Iran, which he called a "tea and sympathy visit." He said that following on national defense strategy presentations by March 14 colleagues Amine Gemayel and Walid Jumblatt, he himself would present Lebanese Forces' plan for the strategy at the next National Dialogue meeting.

U.S. SHOULD CONVINCE ISRAEL TO WITHDRAW FROM SHEBA'A,
WORK ON SOLUTION TO ISRAEL-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

19. (C) The Ambassador asked Geagea what he thought of the idea that Lebanon hold indirect talks with Israel, a subject covered in the media that day on the heels of British Foreign Secretary Miliband's visit. Geagea answered that he was against indirect talks. He said they would be counterproductive and weaken March 14 in the face of Hizballah and the rest of the opposition, which would portray the government as traitorous. Such negotiations would also be lop-sided, he noted, with Israel holding most of the cards, again making the government look weak.

110. (C) Geagea said he planned to visit the United States and tell the new U.S. administration it should convince the Israelis to withdraw from the Sheba'a Farms and hand them over to the United Nations. He noted this would remove an important pretext for Hizballah's existence, and free up Israeli resources in the process: it would be good for Lebanon, and good for Israel, he said. He admitted that

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Hizballah would not immediately relinquish its arms, but he said the Israeli withdrawal from Sheba'a would allow March 14 politicians to pressure Hizballah, accelerating the political process necessary for disarmament.

111. (C) Shampaine countered that the Israelis do not see the situation this way. She said Israel views Sheba'a through the lens of UNSCR 1701. As long as Hizballah is continuing to rearm by smuggling arms across the Syrian border, there is no impetus for Israel to withdraw from Sheba'a. The Israelis do not believe withdrawal would lead to Hizballah's disarmament, she explained. In fact, in the Israeli view, such a withdrawal would be giving in to Hizballah, and giving up something in exchange for nothing. Shampaine added that Israelis are concerned that what happened in Gaza, where Hamas took political credit for Israel's unilateral withdrawal, could be repeated in some way in the Sheba'a Farms.

112. (C) Geagea said the Israelis were mistaken. He believed the continued occupation of Sheba'a would lead to more and "deeper" wars, and noted that in any event, the proposal was to hand Sheba'a over to the UN, not to Lebanon. In addition, he asked that the incoming U.S. administration realize that resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was the most important issue the United States could work on in the region. Peace between the Israelis and Palestinians would undermine the extremists, Iran, and Syria, he said, and no one but the U.S. can solve the problem.

HIZBALLAH "ANXIOUS"

113. (C) Geagea claimed that Hizballah's leadership was

feeling anxious both because of military threats from outside Lebanon and political weakness inside. He said Hizballah took seriously Israel's threat to send eight divisions to invade southern Lebanon, and is keeping quiet as a result. Additionally, Geagea believed, the Iranians are nervous about a possible Israeli-American attack on them. If such an attack occurred, Hizballah would have to be involved, said Geagea, which was another source of anxiety for them. On the electoral front, Geagea said Hizballah was working hard, but sensed weakness in its partner, Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun.

SYRIA: NO ENGAGEMENT
WITHOUT CONDITIONS

¶14. (C) Geagea was frustrated by international engagement with Syria, saying that any such engagement should be set on conditions. He deplored recent trips to Damascus by Miliband and French PM Francois Fillon, and wondered if the Spanish and Italians would be the next to show support to Syria while receiving nothing in return. Nonetheless, he said, the U.S. was the most important actor on this issue. He gave suggestions on what conditions a new U.S. administration should place on Syria in exchange for diplomatic engagement. First, he said, the border between Lebanon and Syria -- particularly in the Sheba'a Farms -- should be delineated, and the Syrians should be held responsible for controlling it. Second, the Syrians should help Lebanon remove the military bases outside the Palestinian refugee camps. Third, the Syrians should return Lebanese detainees (whom Geagea suspected were all dead) held in Syria.
SISON